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# Agonism in education: a systematic scoping review and discussion of its educational potential

George Koutsouris , Lauren Stentiford, Simon Benham-Clarke and David Hall

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## ABSTRACT

Within political philosophy and particularly in the work of Chantal Mouffe and Hannah Arendt, “agonism” has been described as representing the notion of being able to challenge and dissent in a productive way. However, little is known about how agonism is used in the educational literature, other than some applications relevant to democratic education. This paper considers the use of agonism in the educational literature drawing on the findings of a systematic scoping review exploring how it has been used in the context of education. Five databases were searched for literature published using agonism within the context of education to map the existing body of work in a systematic fashion, and to explore how agonism has been differently conceptualised and utilised by researchers in the field of education. The findings suggest that there have been a range of attempts to apply agonistic principles in different educational sub-fields (including, citizenship education, early years education, initial teacher training, arts education and international education), and different interpretations of such principles into education based on different philosophical underpinnings (dissociative and associative approaches). As agonism is mostly explored in a theoretical way, we also discuss the potential of abstract theoretical agonistic principles from different philosophical traditions to be translated into meaningful practical applications for education in order to inform curriculum development, infuse democratic principles into classroom practice, and help to negotiate deep-running tensions amongst key stakeholders in education.

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Agonism; education; democracy; Chantal Mouffe; Hannah Arendt

## Introduction

Within political philosophy, agonism has been described as representing the notion of being able to challenge and dissent in a productive way (e.g. Connolly, 1991; Honig, 1993; Mouffe, 2000). Yet, little is known about how the concept of agonism is used in the educational literature, with the exception of a recent review on democratic education that examined agonism alongside other approaches to democratic education (Sant, 2019). Thus, through this scoping review, we would like to consider the use of agonism as a concept in the broader educational literature. We review what has gone before to map the existing body of work in a systematic fashion, and to explore how agonism has been

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differently conceptualised and utilised by researchers in the field of education. We also discuss the potential of abstract theoretical agonistic principles from different philosophical traditions to be translated into meaningful practical applications for education in order to inform curriculum development, infuse democratic principles into classroom practice, and help negotiate deep-running tensions amongst key stakeholders in education.

## What is agonism?

The term “agonism” derives from the Greek “agon” meaning “painful struggle, conflict and competition or dispute” (Oxford English Dictionary online). The concept has been used as a way of thinking about human relations, specifically suggesting a difficult process of negotiation. Agonism has emerged as a response to the claim that “a liberal view removes from the political agenda the most divisive issues, serious contention about which must undermine the bases of social cooperation” (Rawls, 2005, p. 157) – a claim that suggests that for citizens to reach wide agreement on important political practices and institutions they must bracket their individual social, cultural and moral values and beliefs, in an attempt to achieve neutrality. By contrast, an agonistic approach emphasises “oppositional yet respectful civic and political relations and practices” (Deveaux, 1999, p. 2), thus embracing what makes people different.

Glover (2012) argues that theories of agonism are fragmented but are often misrepresented as a unified theory. So, following Glover’s (2012) categorisation, we explore the distinction between *dissociative* (i.e. resisting reconciliation and emphasising an “us and them” divide) and *associative* (acknowledging the possibility of coalitions and focusing on commonality) approaches to agonism. Other authors use different ways of categorising and exploring approaches to agonism, for example, *emancipatory* and *perfectionist* agonism (Fossen, 2008); or distinguish between thinkers, e.g. republicans (conservative or left leaning) and postmodern democrats (Deveaux, 1999); and some discuss different approaches to agonism as mutually reinforcing (Wenman, 2003). Here, we focus on the ideas of Chantal Mouffe (dissociative agonism), and Hannah Arendt, William Connolly and Bonnie Honig (associative agonism). These authors can be taken to represent influential approaches to agonism, but this list is by no means exhaustive (other thinkers are, indicatively, Jacques Rancière, Étienne Balibar, Ernesto Laclau etc.).

## Dissociative agonism

The original distinction between dissociative and associative agonism was put forward by Mouffe herself in an attempt to distinguish between her own approach to agonism and other versions (Glover, 2012). Mouffe follows Carl Schmitt’s viewpoint that politics is built on the distinction of “us” and “them”, although she effectively uses Schmitt’s own ideas against him and his critical stance towards liberal democracy (Mouffe, 2000). Schmitt was a German political theorist and prominent member of the Nazi Party and Mouffe’s association with his philosophy – especially her “hope to employ the Schmittian conception of the political in a way that is compatible with plurality” (Schaap, 2007, p. 64) – is often discussed as problematic (e.g. Knight Abowitz, 2018). Schaap (2007) also questions

how an us/them dichotomy can be useful in addressing pluralism that is envisaged to involve multiple perspectives.

For Mouffe (2000), agonism is about rearticulating the space of politics, described as constituted by hegemonic practices (the expression of a particular structure of power relations, always temporary and contingent), by “relinquishing the ideal of a democratic society as the realization of a perfect harmony or transparency” (p. 26). Through agonism, Mouffe tries to address the issue of establishing forms of power more compatible with democratic values; she argues that “the novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of [the] us/them opposition – which is an impossibility – but the different way in which it is established” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 15). Thus, the main point of her argument is to accept the inevitability of conflict and abandon the prospect of a rational solution – as for example, in the Rawlsian way of thinking. A phase of struggle and conflict are expected to disrupt the dominant procedures and arrangements (i.e. current hegemonic practices) and to bring about a different order (a different hegemony) (Mouffe, 2014). In this hegemonic struggle, opponents could be reduced to enemies (antagonism) or seen as legitimate adversaries (agonism).

Mouffe (2000) argues that a legitimate adversary is “one with whom we have some common ground, but we disagree on the meaning and implementation of those principles and such a disagreement is not one that could be resolved through deliberation and rational discussion” (p. 27). Mouffe’s vision involves creating channels through which “collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues, which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 28). Thus, for Mouffe, an us/them divide is central for political life and this is where she identifies one main difference between her own dissociative agonism and associative approaches: the attempt of the latter approaches to disrupt an us/them divide to “reach consensus without exclusion” (Mouffe, 2014, p. 150). Mouffe (2014) does acknowledge that certain forms of consensus are necessary for democracy, but she also draws attention to the limits of pluralism – i.e. not all claims can be seen as legitimate, since they may undermine democracy itself.

However, Mouffe’s agonism has also been subject to a number of critiques. Moroni (2019), for example, questions how adversaries are to move from entrenched and often hard-won positions, whether they be cultural, political, social, or economic, to positions where these are reduced or shared. Englund (2016) argues that an agonistic approach places individual identity in focus and thus conflicts can easily become clashes between individuals, rather than between political ideals or perspectives. Erman (2009) points out that Mouffe does not explain how antagonism can transform into agonism; and Vasilev (2015) writes: “Mouffe asserts that a layer of commonality is necessary to bind together the radically plural polity she envisages (p. 81)” – however, the nature of this commonality (i.e. commitment to liberty and equality) is not clearly defined and a requirement for openness to engage with alternative perspectives is implied.

### **Associative agonism**

Whereas Mouffe’s agonism is based on Schmitt, associative approaches to agonism are mainly influenced by Hannah Arendt’s philosophy (e.g. Deveaux, 1999; Glover, 2012). Schaap (2007) argues that, if for Mouffe the importance of political conflict is that “it

makes available meaningful choices that could engage the *demos* in political life, for Arendt the significance of conflict lies in its potential to disclose the commonness of a social world to those it draws in" (p. 59). This is what Mouffe (2014) has criticised as "agonism without antagonism" (p. 152). For Arendt, political life is public and is about experiencing "solidarity in moments of collective action" (Schaap, 2007, p. 60). In addition, it is about *freedom* that can only be actualised where one has the opportunity to appear in public before other people; freedom is not just conceived as political autonomy, but in terms of spontaneous action or *natality* – "a conceptual moment when one is born into the political as the sphere where acting together can create the truly unexpected" (Champlin, 2013, p. 150). Schaap (2007) reads Arendt's work as a source of hope, a response to the tensions of the twentieth century, and "a basis from which to understand power and identity as an emergent property of collective action" (p. 66).

Building on Taminiaux (2000), Schaap (2007) discusses how Arendt draws on Ancient Greeks and Romans to explicate her political vision – by doing so, she identifies a distinction between the two that seems to reflect the differences between dissociative and associative approaches to agonism. On the one hand, Greeks invested in an us/them divide similar to dissociative agonism and akin to Schmitt's philosophical ideas; on the other hand, Romans embraced coalitions in a way that can resemble associative approaches to agonism – although Schaap (2007) notes also the imperialistic nature of Roman treaty-making. Arendt with her emphasis on commonness and solidarity largely affirms the second position and sees Ancient Greek's less broad understanding of pluralism as the reason for the destruction of city-state (Schaap, 2007; Taminiaux, 2000). It is indicative that Arendt (1958) discusses plurality as the condition by means of which political life is actualised:

While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, [...] plurality is specifically *the* condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life. (p. 7, original emphasis)

Thus, for Arendt, "political agonism entails the clash between a plurality of perspectives that are brought to bear on the world by individuals" (Schaap, 2007, p. 70), and this is why the us/them divide of dissociative agonism (i.e. a dichotomous view of the world) can be seen as limiting.

Discussing Arendt's approach to plurality, Deveaux (1999) writes that "identities are shaped agonistically in the public realm because we act and reveal our uniqueness within a context of human power and potentiality" (p. 7). However, she also notes that it would be wrong to assume that Arendt's position is to legitimise the expression of different political identities; for Deveaux, Arendt's approach is about emphasising the uniqueness of people's identities, but in a way more descriptive than normative. Deveaux (1999) argues that a misinterpretation of Arendt's conception of political identities as normative lies at the heart of postmodern approaches to agonism, such as Connolly's and Honig's endorsement of the political value of human diversity.

Building on Arendt, William Connolly and Bonnie Honig represent a postmodern perspective on agonism, and both examine issues of identity and plurality (e.g. Deveaux, 1999; Glover, 2012). Similar to Mouffe, they engage with agonism directly –

whereas Arendt's examination of agonism has been characterised as indirect and ambivalent (Schaap, 2007).

Connolly is influenced by Arendt as well as Nietzsche (Mouffe, 2014). Connolly (1991) puts forward the concept of *agonistic respect*, an appreciation that one's self-definition is bound with that of others, as all people share a common fate – death. Agonistic respect could then be translated into an empathetic concern for that which you are not, what Connolly calls *critical responsiveness* (Glover, 2012). Deveaux (1999) notes that Connolly's agonism can provide a way of challenging essentialist identities, by exposing "settled identities to some of the contestable contingencies that constitute them" (Connolly, 1991, p. 192).

Similar to Connolly, Honig explores issues of identity, but focuses on questioning the fundamentals of the existing political order; she is particularly critical of the us and them distinction of dissociative agonism, that she argues involves projecting political struggles onto an externalised "other" – and calls for the critical examination of "the externalized other's role in consolidating the existing order" (Glover, 2012, p. 95). Central to her work is the distinction between *virtue* (with a focus on procedural practices) and *virtù* (with a focus on disruptive practices) theories of politics (Honig, 1993). Her agonism is about *virtù* in that it keeps open a space of debate and prevents confrontation from closure; for Glover (2012), Honig's agonism extends beyond *virtù* to examine how the existing order is "always already inhabited by a capacity to marginalise" (p. 94). From Mouffe's point of view, Honig's "agonistic struggle is identified with the moment of contestation" (Mouffe, 2014, p. 152) – which for Mouffe is problematic, as it avoids the moment of decision, i.e. the rearticulation of the space of politics.

Overall, Mouffe (2014) is critical of associative approaches to agonism as she argues that they present agonistic debate as a process without an end; and do not address the matter of exclusion of extreme voices from public debate, thus giving "free rein to the expression of plurality" (p. 153). With regards to Mouffe's criticisms, Glover (2012), however, argues that associative – and especially postmodern – approaches to agonism tend to be too abstract in their claims, and this is also echoed by Deveaux (1999).

## Agonism and education

Education is often the battleground of heated public debates, whether this is out of, or in the school classroom – and one does not have to look further than education debates during Covid-19 and the contestation around school closures, online learning, the widening of inequalities between students, and debates on changing education (e.g. Millar, 2020). Agonism has increasingly been used within the field of education (e.g. Hansen et al., 2015; Lo, 2017; Thomas-Reid, 2018; Zembylas, 2018), however little is known about how and to what extent authors have used agonism, which approaches they have taken, and to what end.

Sant (2019) conducted a theoretical literature review to explore how democratic education is conceptualised within the educational literature. It is not clear how papers focusing on agonism compared to papers representing other approaches to democratic education, but there is evidence that agonism is used in educational literature, "although the proposals of agonistic educators are relatively new when compared with more

consolidated frameworks” (p. 679). Yet, there is little evidence on how agonistic approaches are used and in what ways across educational sub-fields.

Thus, this paper aims to understand how agonism is used within the broader educational literature. We seek to answer the following questions:

- How is agonism used in educational research?
- What characterises the educational research on agonism?

## **Methodology**

### ***Search strategy***

In this systematic scoping review, a comprehensive search strategy was developed following an initial search of the topic area. A scoping review involves a preliminary assessment of the nature and extent of the research evidence available, determined by particular scope constraints (Grant & Booth, 2009). Accordingly, the search focussed on how the concept of agonism is used within the context of education.

### ***Search terms***

In this review, we cross-searched “agonism” terms (“agonism” ti. ab., “agonist\*” ti. ab.) with “education” search terms (“education\*” ti. ab., “school\*” ti. ab., “classroom\*” ti. ab., “learn\*” ti. ab., “teach\*” ti. ab.).

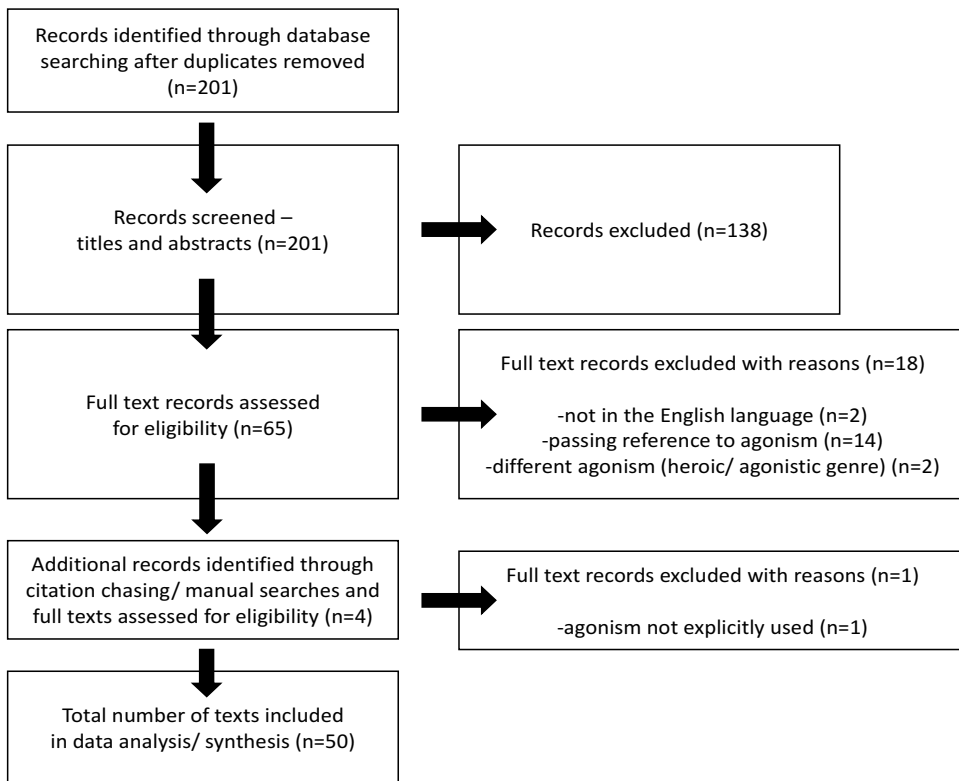
### ***Database searching***

In March 2020, five electronic databases were searched using the search terms. These were: British Education Index, Education Research Complete, ERIC, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences and Australian Education Index. Results were limited to peer-reviewed texts.

### ***Inclusion criteria***

To be included in this review, texts had to meet the following criteria:

- Be published in English (so that meaning is not lost in translation), but texts could originate from any country.
- Focus on the concept of agonism in the context of education (any kind or level of education).
- Make an explicit reference to the concept of agonism (with or without reference to theory/theories), even if agonism is not the central focus of the paper; papers making extremely brief passing references to agonism were not included.
- Use a version of agonism as conceptualised in political philosophy. We found a high number of papers emanating from medical journals where the word “agonism” is often used to refer to medicalised processes – i.e. the combining of chemical



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram depicting records identified, included and excluded at each stage, with reasons.

substances within receptors to stimulate a reaction (Miriam Webster Dictionary online). These papers were excluded.

- Be of any format (e.g. empirical study, theoretical piece, literature review). We deliberately left this criterion open because we wanted to explore the state of the existing literature – and more particularly to examine in a critical manner how the concept of agonism has been used in empirical studies.

No date restriction was placed on the search.

### **Selection process**

We first conducted a pilot screening stage where two of the authors (GK and LS) screened 20% of the records independently to discuss and agree on screening decisions. Following this, GK screened the titles and abstracts of all located texts and classified each paper as potentially include or exclude according to the above criteria. Full text copies were then obtained and assessed for inclusion by GK, following piloting of 20% of the records (GK and LS). A PRISMA flow diagram has been used to depict the number of studies identified, included and excluded at each stage of the search (see [Figure 1](#)).



**Table 1.** Descriptive table of findings.

Author	Date	Journal	Country	Focus on agonism	Type of study	Sub-field of education
Ambrosio	2019	Democracy & Education	USA	agonism central	theoretical piece	inclusion
Andersson & Olson	2014	Journal of Social Science Education	Sweden	agonism central	case study	public pedagogy
Backer	2017	Philosophy of Education Yearbook	USA	agonism central	theoretical piece	democratic education
Baldacchino	2013	Studies in Philosophy & Education	UK	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	art education
Bath & Karlsson	2016	Childhood	UK & Sweden	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece drawing on empirical work	citizenship education & early years education
Bown & Sumsion	2016	Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood	Australia	agonism central	empirical study	early years education
Clarke & Phelan	2015	Power and Education	UK & Canada	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	initial teacher education
Clarke	2006	Teaching Education	SAR China	agonism central	empirical study	initial teacher education
Connors	1996	College English	USA	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	academic agonism
Davies	1990	British Journal of Sociology of Education	USA	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	traditional education
Diorio	2011	Curriculum Inquiry	New Zealand	agonism central	theoretical piece	citizenship education
Egglezou	2019	Solsko Polje	Greece	agonism central	theoretical piece	critical pedagogy
Englund	2016	Journal of Curriculum Studies	Sweden	agonism central	theoretical piece	inclusion
Franck	2017	Journal of Education for Sustainable Development	Sweden	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	ethics education and sustainability
Hammersley-Fletcher et al	2018	Cambridge Journal of Education	UK	agonism central	empirical study	teacher professional development
Hansen et al	2015	Transnational Curriculum Inquiry	Denmark & Canada	agonism central	theoretical piece	initial teacher education
Hasslöf et al	2014	International Journal of Environmental and Science Education	Sweden	agonism central	case study	education for sustainable development
Hayden	2018	Philosophical Inquiry in Education	USA	agonism central	theoretical piece	cosmopolitan education
Jennings	2006	Religious education	USA	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	pedagogy of belonging
Johansson & Emilson	2016	International Journal of Early Years Education	Norway & Sweden	agonism central	empirical study	early years education
Kalin & Barney	2014	International Journal of Art & Design Education	USA	agonism central	theoretical piece	art education
Klein	2018	Journal of Peacebuilding & Development	USA	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	folk schools
Knight Abowitz	2018	Philosophical Inquiry in Education	USA	agonism central	theoretical piece	civic education
Leiviskä	2018	Journal of Philosophy of Education	Finland	agonism central	theoretical piece	citizenship education & political education
Ljunggren	2010	Studies in Philosophy & Education	Sweden	agonism central	theoretical piece	moral education
Lo	2017	Democracy & Education	USA	agonism central	theoretical piece	democratic education

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued).

Author	Date	Journal	Country	Focus on agonism	Type of study	Sub-field of education
Lynch et al	1997	College Composition & Communication	USA	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	conflict-based pedagogy
McDevitt & Caton-Rosser	2009	InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education & Information Studies	USA	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	democratic education
Moss	2007	Educational Philosophy & Theory	UK	agonism central	theoretical piece	early years education
Narey	2012	Philosophical Studies in Education	USA	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	democratic education
Nicholson-Sanz	2014	Research in Drama Education	UK	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece drawing on empirical work	drama education
Petrie et al	2019	International Journal of Lifelong Education	UK	agonism central	theoretical piece	adult education
Pinto	2014	Policy Futures in Education	Canada	agonism central	case study	curriculum reform
Ruitenbergh	2009	Studies in Philosophy & Education	Canada	agonism central	theoretical piece	citizenship education
Sant	2019	Review of Educational Research	UK	agonism central	theoretical literature review	democratic education
Suspitsyna	2012	Journal of Higher Education	USA	agonism peripheral	secondary (discourse) analysis	higher education
Tarc & Mishra	2015	British Journal of Sociology of Education	Canada	agonism peripheral	empirical study	international schools
Thomas-Reid	2018	Democracy & Education	USA	agonism central	theoretical piece	transformative education
Todd	2010	Studies in Philosophy & Education	Sweden	agonism central	theoretical piece	cosmopolitan education & inclusion
Tryggvason	2017	Philosophical Inquiry in Education	Sweden	agonism central	theoretical piece	citizenship education
Tryggvason	2018	Democracy & Education	Sweden	agonism central	theoretical piece	citizenship education
Tryggvason	2019	Democracy & Education	Sweden	agonism central	theoretical piece	political education
Van Bouwel & Van Oudheusden	2017	Social Epistemology	Belgium	agonism central	theoretical piece	technology education
Westbrook	2002	Rhetoric Review	USA	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece drawing on archival evidence	critical pedagogy
Wood	2018	Early Child Development & Care	UK	agonism peripheral	case study	social and emotional learning
Yacek	2019	Educational Theory	Germany	agonism peripheral	theoretical piece	civic education
Yamanaka	2019	Educational Studies in Japan: International Yearbook	Japan	agonism central	theoretical piece	political education
Zembylas	2011	Education, Citizenship & Social Justice	Cyprus	agonism central	theoretical piece	citizenship education
Zembylas	2017	Journal of Philosophy of Education	Cyprus	agonism central	theoretical piece	human rights education
Zembylas	2018	Democracy & Education	Cyprus	agonism central	theoretical piece	citizenship education

### ***Additional search strategies***

We looked at the reference lists of some included full texts that we deemed to be highly relevant and screened any papers that looked useful to expand the number of texts found (i.e. backwards citation chasing). A manual search was also conducted using Google Scholar that resulted in 3 additional papers discussing agonism and initial teacher education.

### ***Data management***

EndNote X8 software was used to manage references throughout the review.

### ***Data charting***

We created a data table in Excel and charted relevant data from the final included texts. This was done by GK, following a pilot stage with LS to refine the charting process. Data charted included: author(s), date, journal, country, type of study, focus on agonism (central or peripheral) and sub-field of education.

### ***Analysis***

We used a form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify themes emerging across the set of texts located. GK read all papers to stimulate general initial ideas about the data. Texts were then imported into NVivo 12 and were subject to a stage of initial coding where both semantic and latent content relating to “agonism” and “education” were coded. We were particularly interested in identifying patterns, inconsistencies and tensions across the texts in terms of analytical focus, conceptualisation of agonism, and application within an educational sub-field. These codes were then grouped together to form overarching themes. LS discussed these overarching themes with GK to further refine them.

### ***Findings***

There were 50 texts located in this review. Table 1 provides a full descriptive table of findings from the articles. The findings are now presented and discussed, organised under the two research questions: How is agonism used in educational research? (descriptive findings); What characterises the educational research on agonism? (analytic findings).

#### ***How is agonism used in educational research? (descriptive findings)***

##### ***Date***

Of the 50 papers included in the review, the oldest dated to 1990 (Davies, 1990). Between 1990 and 2007, only 7 papers using the concept of agonism in relation to education were published (1990, n = 1; 1996, n = 1; 1997, n = 1; 2002, n = 1; 2006, n = 2; 2007, n = 1). From 2009 to 2019 the number of papers published gradually increased (2009, n = 2; 2010, n = 2; 2011, n = 2; 2012, n = 2; 2013, n = 1; 2014, n = 5; 2015, n = 3; 2016, n = 4; 2017, n = 6),

with 2018 and 2019 being the most productive years so far with 9 and 7 papers published, respectively. This suggests that recently there is growing interest in exploring agonism within the context of education.

### Country

The papers located originated from countries across the globe – although it must be acknowledged that a limitation in this review is that only studies published in the English language were included. The most represented country was the USA with 16 papers, followed by Sweden with 9 papers and the UK with 7 papers. Other countries were Canada,  $n = 3$ ; Cyprus,  $n = 3$ ; Australia,  $n = 1$ ; Belgium,  $n = 1$ ; Finland,  $n = 1$ ; Germany,  $n = 1$ ; Greece,  $n = 1$ ; Japan,  $n = 1$ ; New Zealand,  $n = 1$ ; and SAR China,  $n = 1$ . There were also a number of collaborations, namely Denmark & Canada, Norway & Sweden, UK & Sweden, and UK & Canada with one publication each. This suggests that the concept of agonism within the context of education has mainly been explored in the USA, Canada, the UK, Scandinavia and Cyprus; this finding should be interpreted cautiously as these are either English speaking countries or scholars in these countries tend to publish in the English language. Interestingly, the search also captured two papers, one from Portugal (Patacho, 2011) and another from Brazil (Macedo, 2015), both written in Portuguese (and thus excluded). This indicates that agonism and education is a topic discussed in papers published in other languages.

### Journals

The 50 papers were published in a range of diverse journals (38 different journals). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the journals had an educational focus (either more theoretical – e.g. *Educational Philosophy & Theory*; or professional, e.g. *College Composition & Communication*), however there was also a case of a journal that did not have an explicit educational focus (*Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*). 33 journals were represented by a single paper – exceptions were the *Democracy & Education* journal with 6 papers; *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* with 3 papers; *Studies in Philosophy & Education* with 3 papers; *British Journal of Sociology of Education* with 2 papers; and *Journal of Philosophy of Education* with 2 papers. These are all journals with a strong philosophical and/or theoretical focus. The range of journals reflects also the different educational sub-fields represented in the studies that are discussed later on.

### Focus on agonism (central or peripheral)

For 33 out of 50 publications, agonism was deemed by the reviewers to be a central concept and it was discussed with reference to a particular theory/theorist (Chantal Mouffe, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Rancière, Bonnie Honig etc.). In the remaining publications ( $n = 17$ ), we felt there was a brief but still significant reference to agonism, and agonism was either discussed with reference to theory (Chantal Mouffe: 10; Étienne Balibar: 1); or with no reference to a theory/theorist ( $n = 6$ ). Chantal Mouffe was cited in 35 out of 50 papers, making her the theorist mostly closely associated with agonism, followed by Hannah Arendt ( $n = 10$ ). Main themes and debates in terms of how agonism was used in the papers are discussed in the section that discusses analytic findings.

### **Format and methods**

Most papers were theoretical pieces ( $n = 39$ ) – although some of the theoretical papers did draw on archival (Westbrook, 2002) or other empirical evidence, e.g. observations (Bath & Karlsson, 2016) and stage performance reflections (Nicholson-Sanz, 2014). We categorised 9 studies as primarily empirical, involving interviews (Bown & Sumsion, 2016; Hammersley-Fletcher et al., 2018), discourse analysis (Clarke, 2006), analysis of video observations (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Tarc & Mishra Tarc) and case studies ( $n = 4$ ) (Andersson & Olson, 2014; Hasslof et al., 2014; Pinto, 2014; Wood, 2018). One study involved a secondary discourse analysis (speeches by the U.S. Department of Education) (Suspitsyna, 2012) and there was also a UK-based theoretical literature review with a focus on democratic education (Sant, 2019).

### **Agonism in the context of different sub-fields of education**

All of the papers included in the review ( $n = 50$ ) discussed agonism explicitly in relation to education, but studies could be grouped into certain categories by context. By this, we mean that certain trends emerged regarding sub-fields of educational study that were of key focus in the papers (see Table 1).

**Agonism and civic (citizenship, democratic and political) education.** A large group of papers discussed agonism in relation to citizenship education, democratic education and political education ( $n = 17$ ). Ruitenberg (2009), for example, influenced by Mouffe's agonism, proposes the concept *radical democratic citizenship education*; an approach that highlights that education has "an important role to play in the preparation of citizens for the role of political adversary" (p. 275). From a different perspective, Yamanaka (2019) describes the role of political education as a way for children to learn how they can express their passions in a democratic way through participation into political life; and McDevitt and Caton-Rosser (2009) propose the concept of *agonistic instruction* that acknowledges and reflects the different perspectives of a pluralistic world. In addition, Tryggvason (2018) describes classrooms as "unusual political spaces" (p. 5) that provide children with experiences of political discussions that they might not be able to access elsewhere; and Knight Abowitz (2018), following Honig, explores the notion of *schools as public things* – i.e. "shared spaces or places which represent democratic investment as well as struggle" (p. 8), and operate as sites for developing and reconstructing collective identities.

**Agonism and pedagogical issues.** Another group explored what might be referred to as broader pedagogical issues ( $n = 9$ ), such as inclusion, critical and transformative pedagogy, conflict-based pedagogy, pedagogy of belonging, public pedagogy, and social and emotional learning (see Table 1). Three papers explored agonism from the perspective of inclusion; Ambrosio (2019) and Todd (2010) argue that an agonistic approach to inclusion has the potential to empower voices in the classroom that are often silenced – this was discussed with particular reference to perspectives of marginalised groups, including gender perspectives (Ambrosio, 2019) and students facing harassment and school expulsion (Todd, 2010). Agonism was seen as giving these groups an opportunity to be heard, even when listening to them might be challenging. In relation to this, Backer (2017) related agonism to *intersectionality* theory (Crenshaw, 1989) – the space where different

dimensions of identity (e.g. disability, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, gender etc.) meet; Backer (2017) notes that intersectionality research can provide the content for radical discussions and draw attention to plural perspectives.

***Agonism and international education.*** Six papers discussed agonism in the context of cosmopolitan education (n = 2), ethics education and sustainability (n = 1), education for sustainable development (n = 1), human rights education (n = 1) and international schools (n = 1) – educational sub-fields often grouped under the umbrella term “international education” (Hayden & Thompson, 1995). Hayden (2018), for example, discusses aspects of cosmopolitan education, understood as an interaction between inter/personal dimensions that highlight the challenges of pluralism and question ideas about harmony, consensus and universality. The challenge of integrating plural perspectives is also explored in the context of education for sustainable development (e.g. Franck, 2017). In addition, Zembylas (2017) questions the universality of human rights that are described as “practices that can be evaluated critically rather than taken on faith” (p. 709); and Tarc and Mishra Tarc (2015) consider elite international schools as spaces where teacher identities are (re)shaped, reflecting the “complex transnational story of contacts, mobilities and social class-making under globalization” (p. 49).

***Agonism and early years education.*** Papers also explored early years education (n = 4). Johansson and Emilson (2016) relate agonism to playfulness, emotions and conflict, and describe an agonistic approach as a tool for student learning of democratic principles; a similar approach is adopted by Bath and Karlsson (2016) who examine examples of young children acting as citizens. From a different perspective, Bown and Sumsion (2016) draw on agonistic principles to explore the fragmentation of early childhood education in Australia, with Moss (2007) discussing a divide between policy and practice that calls for the development of “an agonistic politics that attracts at least some occupying different positions in the field” (p. 236).

***Agonism and initial teacher education/professional development.*** Another group of papers examined initial teacher education and professional development (n = 4). Hansen et al. (2015) argue that teachers should be educated as “teacher citizens” – “agonistic subjects” who can negotiate “who they are and [possess] the ability to refuse who they ought to be” (p. 50). Their argument is that initial teacher education should prepare teachers to be willing and prepared to engage in public debate about matters of education policy and practice; this is also echoed by Clarke and Phelan (2015) who examine the education of student teachers as “political adversaries” (p. 264). From a different perspective, Clarke (2006) discusses how agonistic principles can be used within teacher training programmes to develop empathy between teachers of different generations; and Hammersley-Fletcher et al. (2018) relate agonism to teacher professional development that involves the cultivation of a democratic ethos, discussed as confidence to assume intellectual leadership, engagement with plural perspectives, and acceptance of difference and disagreement as inherent in rethinking educational policy and practice.

***Agonism and art and drama education.*** Papers also examined art and drama education (n = 3). Baldacchino (2013), for example, discusses agonism in relation to a “state of affairs

[that] reveals art's inherent paradox where the expectation of learning is substituted by forms of unlearning" (p. 415); unlearning (i.e. challenging one's own ideas) is seen as a necessary element of "pedagogical aesthetics", that describes artistic practices that incorporate pedagogical principles. From a similar pedagogical perspective, Kalin and Barney (2014) explore the idea of lived curriculum as an agonist inquiry into curriculum design that is in close proximity with art projects. Raising issues of identity within the context of drama education – and using theatrical performance as a vehicle – Nicholson-Sanz (2014) discusses links between Brazil and Africa and the development of new collective identities based on agonistic pluralism.

***Agonism and other education sub-fields.*** There were also single papers exploring agonism within the context of Scandinavian folk schools (Klein, 2018), technology education (Van Bouwel & Van Oudheusden, 2017), higher education (Suspitsyna, 2012), moral education (Ljunggren, 2010), adult education (Petrie et al., 2019), curriculum reform (Pinto, 2014) and critiques of traditional education (Davies, 1990).

### ***What characterises the educational research on agonism? (analytic findings)***

In this section, we present findings organised into two sections (Core themes and Debates and conflicts) to denote how we felt the authors conceptualised and applied "agonism" within their work.

#### ***Core themes***

We established 6 core themes to describe different uses of agonism as below:

***Agonism as a "floating signifier"?*** Almost half of the papers discussed a number of "agonistic" concepts; organised by the number of papers in which they were discussed, these concepts were: agonistic deliberation and debate (n = 7); agonistic and radical democracy (n = 5); agonistic pluralism (n = 4); agonistic agency (n = 1); agonistic communication (n = 1); agonistic cosmopolitics (n = 1); agonistic inquiry (n = 1); agonistic morality (n = 1); agonistic recognition (n = 1); agonistic rhetoric (n = 1); agonistic understanding of rights (n = 1); and agonistic instruction (n = 1). Agonism was also approached as *polemic*, a type of rhetoric that builds on competition and conflict (Andersson & Olson, 2014), and *racial agonism* with regards to challenging colonial legacies and dominant discourses (Jennings, 2017). Judging from these concepts, one could argue that agonism runs the risk of becoming a "floating signifier" – a way of adding an additional layer of theoretical meaning to an abstract notion or concept, e.g. a commitment to pluralism and democratic values, but without clear reference to underlying theories.

***Agonism used to support theoretical arguments relating to "emotive" educational issues.*** Agonism was used by some to support theoretical arguments about often highly emotive or sensitive educational issues where tensions and debate are common: e.g. Diorio's (2011) paper that discusses the case of same-sex marriage within the context of citizenship education; Todd's (2010) work that refers to the debates surrounding the wearing of various forms of Muslim dress in schools; and Connors' (1996) ideas that relate to the discussion of the feminisation of education. Another group explored agonism from



the perspective of emotive issues of democracy, including populism (Petrie et al., 2019) and ethnic divisions (Zembylas, 2011).

***Agonism used to discuss issues of democracy, debate and pluralism.*** A large group of papers (n = 10) discussed agonism within the context of citizenship education, with regards to democratic debate and rhetoric (e.g. Ambrosio, 2019; Egglezou, 2019; Westbrook, 2002). Some of them explored differences between deliberative approaches to democracy based on Rawls and Habermas (where the aim is to reach rational consensus) and agonistic approaches (where the focus is on turning enemies into adversaries) (e.g. Backer, 2017; Ruitenberg, 2009) – this point is revisited later on. Aspects of pluralism within a range of educational sub-fields were also explicitly discussed by 6 papers (e.g. Hayden, 2018; Narey, 2012).

***Agonism used to discuss the purpose of education.*** Other papers discussed ideas about the broader meaning of education, which is again often seen as an area of complex debate and where proponents can hold markedly different views; Ljunggren (2010) for instance, uses the concept of *agonistic recognition* as a way of understanding “what it means to be educated”: “in contrast to having been taught about the world, being educated means understanding the self – not in isolation but in a way that I will refer to as agonistic recognition in education” (p. 20). This idea can be connected to Thomas-Reid’s (2018) point about how agonism seems to reflect Biesta’s view of “weak education” – a kind of education that is not prescribed or procedural (i.e. strong) but invites the emergence of new identities and enables transformative learning. Agonism was also associated with other elements of critical pedagogy, such as public pedagogy (Andersson & Olson, 2014), pedagogy of belonging (Jennings, 2017) and conflict-based pedagogy (Lynch et al., 1997).

***Agonism used as a research approach.*** There were also four cases where agonism was used and discussed from a methodological perspective, including as a framework for discourse or thematic analysis.

Johansson and Emilson (2016) investigated resistance in everyday conflicts in early childhood settings as opportunities for democracy learning; they used a framework based on Mouffe’s agonistic theory to analyse video-recorded observations of teacher-child and child-child interactions. In addition, Pinto (2014) developed a framework for thematic analysis to analyse interviews with policy actors and explore aspects of civic learning through citizen participation; she then compared the themes to Mouffe’s criteria for agonistic democracy and made note of connections. Finally, Hasslof et al. (2014) proposed a discourse analysis tool focusing on the way content and language are used in discussion where different views are involved, with an aim to explore both *what* is said and *how* with regards to a polarised educational topic.

With regards to discussing the absence of dialogue within early years education, Moss (2007) referred to a link between agonism and *social mapping*, i.e. a methodological approach involving mapping a range of different positions and uncovering interrelations that can foster dialogue and understanding among people perceiving themselves as representing different views.



***Agonism as a pedagogic tool to be used with students in the classroom.*** A small number of papers ( $n = 2$ ) (Clarke, 2006; Lo, 2017) discussed how agonism can be translated into educational practice, making reference to particular pedagogic tools that teachers might use to challenge (often entrenched) views and invite students to embrace agonistic principles; namely, appreciating pluralism and engaging with emotions and conflict in a constructive way. An example tool is *structured academic controversy* (SAC) that Lo (2017) describes as a classroom practice to support students to engage with and practice activities involving debate, based on agonistic principles. The difference identified between SAC and “common” debate is that in the case of the latter there is often the expectation of a winner, whereas SAC seeks temporary resolutions that are always open to renegotiation (see Ambrosio, 2019). Lo (2017) argues that aiming for negotiation rather than consensus (a resolution once and for all) might “help transform students’ ideas and thinking about the issue, the factors surrounding the issue, or at least how they perceive possible solutions to the issue” (p. 8). On a critical note, Englund (2016) notes that, although often constructive, such approaches can place significant emphasis on conflict and disagreement – thus in a sense more on what separates people rather than on what unites them.

### ***Debates and conflicts***

Below we outline some of the main debates and conflicts about agonism that raise broader philosophical and theoretical questions, as discussed in a portion of the papers. Many of the papers raising similar theoretical issues were focused on citizenship, political or democratic education, and some were also published in the USA-based *Democracy & Education* journal.

***Should we invest in an us/them divide? Tensions between associative and dissociative approaches.*** One of the key issues discussed in some of the papers was whether an us/them divide is central to political life (as in Mouffe’s *dissociative* agonism) – or whether reinforcing such a divide ought to be avoided because it is potentially dangerous (e.g. Englund, 2016), or because commonality would be better emphasised, i.e. an approach resembling *associative* agonism (e.g. Arendt, Honig). Ruitenberg (2009), for example, building on Mouffe’s dissociative agonism, invites debate in education but distinguishes between adversaries and competitors; she argues that “educating political adversaries requires that students understand that a political adversary is different not only from a moral enemy, but also from a competitor” (p. 278). She argues that competition in education reflects neoliberal ideas, with opponents constructed as enemies to be defeated in a quest for personal satisfaction; by contrast, adversaries engaging in debate is the expression of a commitment to democratic procedures.

From a different perspective, Englund (2016) writes that mutual agreement or understanding arising out of debate and conflict is just one of the possible outcomes – with the other being a “greater clarity about differences” (p. 66). Influenced by Honig’s associative agonism, Knight Abowitz (2018) makes a similar point, placing emphasis on “the kind of public work and habits of public creation that bring people into meaningful shared projects” (p. 11), that could also be related to the notion of *public pedagogy* which is based on Arendt’s philosophical ideas (Andersson & Olson, 2014).

***Can agonism and deliberation be assimilated?*** A relevant debate discussed in a small number of the papers is whether Mouffe's agonism and approaches emphasising rational deliberation (based on Rawls or Habermas) can be assimilated, in the sense that some of their principles can fruitfully be merged. Backer (2017), drawing on Ruitenberg (2009), distinguishes between two types of thinkers that he calls *deliberators* and *agonists* that take different approaches to this matter. Englund (2016) could be seen as representing the group of deliberators, as he sees "agonism as a link to deliberation" (p. 70) and conflict as a precondition or first step for deliberation.

Tryggvason (2018) could be discussed as a representative of the group of agonists. He argues that dissociative agonism and approaches focusing on rational deliberation cannot be reconciled since, for Mouffe, agonism and antagonism coexist, as agonism involves the sublimation, but not the eradication, of antagonism – he notes, however, that this might not be the case for associative approaches to agonism, such as Arendt's agonism that Mouffe has criticised as "agonism without antagonism" (p. 152). Lo (2017) seems to take the middle point between deliberators and agonists, by arguing that "instead of focusing only on the consensus-making powers of logical deliberation, teachers can guide students into conversations for negotiation and transformation" (p. 6).

***Should emotions be utilised?*** Examining the role of emotions in deliberation was another recurring debate, with some authors drawing attention to the importance of the articulation of emotions in political life (e.g. Lo, 2017; Yacek, 2019; Yamanaka, 2019); and others being sceptical or critical of any approach that utilises emotions (e.g. Hansen et al., 2015; Thomas-Reid, 2018). It should be noted here that Mouffe (2014) purposively uses *passions* rather than *emotions*, since she feels that emotions emphasise individuals. We have used "emotions" as many authors used this term (e.g. Ruitenberg, 2009; Thomas-Reid, 2018; Tryggvason, 2017; Zembylas, 2018). Ruitenberg (2009) notes that accepting that emotions have a legitimate place in political life has implications for education in terms of "understanding the cultural significance and significations of emotions, the way they are collaboratively constructed" (p. 277). Zembylas (2018), for example, discusses the concept of *affective citizenship* that highlights that political discussions in the classroom take place not only in the context of power relations but also of affective attachments, such as belonging or pride. Utilising emotions, however, was questioned by some authors as it can reinforce differences or legitimise provocative and oppressive views (e.g. Thomas-Reid, 2018), raising also the question as to whether such voices can be excluded from debate, as discussed next.

***Are there limits to pluralism? The matter of exclusion of certain voices from debate.***

Another contested matter discussed in some of the papers is the exclusion of particular voices from debate, as these voices might be seen as a threat to democracy itself. Leiviskä (2018), for example, argues that Mouffe's agonism fails to provide an adequate response to the issue of accommodating radical others in democratic debate, as it involves an internal contradiction: "in order to sustain the central democratic principles and protect democracy against intolerance and inequality, a democratic polity must paradoxically exclude those who are not willing to adhere to its central values and principles" (p. 505). However, others are open to acknowledging a boundary: "when it comes to democratic participation, the political boundary is between those who adhere to the key values of

democracy (equality and liberty) and those who do not” (Tryggvason, 2019, p. 3); with Tryggvason (2019) highlighting also the educational possibilities of openly discussing acts of exclusion in the classroom.

Tryggvason (2019) also argues that any decisions about exclusion should be politically grounded, thus based on what we/they *want* – rather than who we/they *are* – and examines the possibility that aiming for consensus can reaffirm those in power (in the case of a classroom, popular students). In a similar vein, Thomas-Reid (2018) recognises that pedagogic decisions influenced by agonism might be useful, but also notes that agonistic debate in the classroom could also marginalise certain minority groups or legitimise bigoted perspectives. Drawing on Biesta’s concept of *weak education* (discussed earlier on), he calls for “a weaker model of deliberation: one that sets the conditions for transformative education, does not act as an instrument for it, and is at its core antioppressive” (Thomas-Reid, 2018, p. 5).

## Discussion

We now discuss these findings organised according to the two research questions and we conclude with a section exploring possible directions for future research.

### *How is agonism used in educational research?*

We found that agonism in educational research started to be used from 1990 onwards, and the number of publications has recently become more significant, suggesting that there is growing interest. Authors publish papers about agonism and education in a great diversity of mainly theoretically oriented journals with a largely educational focus. Agonism and education are mainly discussed together in publications from the USA, UK, Canada, Scandinavia and Cyprus, however there is also evidence of publications in local languages (e.g. Portuguese). Within education, agonism is related to a number of educational sub-fields, including but not limited to citizenship education, international education, early years education, initial teacher education and art education. These sub-fields are diverse, but they are often focused on issues to do with diversity, inclusion, plurality, the management of difference, and where different viewpoints are common.

As discussed, Sant (2019) has conducted a theoretical literature review on democratic education, where among other approaches, agonism was examined. In Sant’s (2019) review, the following implications of agonistic approaches in education were suggested, which are all consistent with the findings of our review: (1) agonism involves the creation of spaces where it is safe to dissent and disagree with others; (2) an agonistic education provides all students with opportunities to express their views, and this is particularly crucial for marginalised groups and disempowered voices; (3) through agonism educators can ensure their students understand that others might be political adversaries over a particular political conflict, but this does not mean that they need to be questioned based on personal qualities; (4) educational institutions are considered spaces where the meaning of democracy and politics are constantly (re)constructed; and (5) agonism involves the education of political emotions and provides the space where emotions can be articulated.

To these implications for education as drawn by Sant (2019), we could add based on the findings of our review that agonism was discussed: (i) in papers under the umbrella term international education, as a way of negotiating and navigating plurality in an interconnected world (e.g. Hayden, 2018); (ii) in initial teacher education as navigating tensions and developing a stronger public identity (e.g. Hansen et al., 2015); (iii) in early years education, as a way of exploring the fragmentation of the field (Bown & Sumsion, 2016) and addressing the gap between theory and practice (Moss, 2007); and finally (iv) in arts education (e.g. Baldacchino, 2013), as well as other educational literature (such as, Ljunggren, 2010), as an element of critical pedagogy and transformative learning.

### ***What characterises the educational research on agonism?***

Given the high proportion of theoretical papers identified in this search (n = 39), the main focus of the papers tended to be on debating the philosophy and values underpinning education (i.e. democracy, respect, openness) or on discussing emotive educational issues, such as the wearing of the veil in schools (Todd, 2010). Less attention has been paid by researchers to practical teaching and learning matters – for example, how agonism as a theoretical concept might be translated into teaching practice or inform curriculum development, with only two papers (Clarke, 2006; Lo, 2017) setting out principles for pedagogic tools based on agonism that could inform educational practice.

A number of debates were explored in the papers, reinforcing the point that there is no single and coherent theory of agonism (Glover, 2012), with the most prominent being the one between dissociative and associative approaches to agonism. Mouffe's dissociative agonism was referenced in 35 out of 50 papers, however, Mouffe was also heavily criticised for her focus on an us/them divide (Englund, 2016), the way passions are emphasised in her work (Thomas-Reid, 2018), and the limited way she addresses the exclusion of certain voices from debate (Leiviskä, 2018). Some of these criticisms are also broadly reported in the literature (e.g. Deveaux, 1999; Glover, 2012), although other authors note that some critiques reflect misinterpretations of Mouffe's theoretical ideas (Tryggvason, 2019). Englund (2016) argues that "some of the ideals of agonism are not suitable for discussions in the classroom, or at least may need to be transformed to be suitable" (p. 69), so he tried to build a link between agonism and rational deliberation – a link that, Tryggvason (2018) argues, is theoretically inconsistent when it comes to Mouffe's dissociative agonism, but it might be less so in the case of associative approaches to agonism (mostly based on Hannah Arendt's work). Associative approaches were also discussed in the papers (n = 10) and can be seen as taking a more moderate approach with a focus on commonality – that make them more attractive to some (e.g. Schaap, 2007). Examples of associative approaches include an exploration of schools as sites where shared identities are (re)constructed (Knight Abowitz, 2018); and Andersson and Olson's (2014) notion of *public pedagogy*, that is an opportunity to *become public*, traced to Arendt's concept of natality.

Overall, the question is whether agonistic principles can be fruitfully used in the context of education not just in terms of enriching educational theory, but also practice. On the one hand, Mouffe's dissociative agonism seems to be more problematic, as it draws attention to what separates people and has the potential to reinforce oppressive perspectives in the classroom (Thomas-Reid, 2018). However, one should not

underestimate the complexities but also the educational possibilities of dissociative agonism, as it has the potential to generate deep and honest discussions (Lo, 2017) and thus equip students with the skills to navigate tensions and become thoughtful citizens.

On the other hand, associative approaches based on Arendt's philosophy, seem to be more easily translatable into education, with their focus on what brings people together – Arendt, for example, uses the metaphor of people sitting around a table that serves both to relate and separate them, since people are *with* others, but not *for* or *against* others (Veck & Gunter, 2020). This attitude feels very appropriate for educational practice, however approaches based on Arendt have often been accused of being too abstract (Glover, 2012), and Mouffe (2000) would possibly argue that they fail to recognise the conflictual nature of human relations.

### **Conclusion: what about future research on agonism and education?**

Moving forwards from this review, we see two ways in which agonism can be further explored in the context of education. First, although agonism is discussed in the educational literature mainly from a theoretical point of view, agonistic principles can potentially have useful applications for educational practice and day-to-day classroom activities. As shown in the review, these themes are not very well explored, but can be seen as involving exposing students to the challenges of democratic procedures, thus preparing active and thoughtful citizens. Teaching children (and/or teachers) how to engage in democratic debate can require them to be more open-minded and tolerant, and this has the potential to change not only education, but also society in the long term – one only needs to think about the intensely heated public debates pertaining to contemporary international issues such as climate change, refugee crises, Brexit, Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter (e.g. Ferguson, 2019; Okolosie, 2020; Viner et al., 2020) and how these issues are currently being handled within different nation states. (This paper is also written during the aftermath of the 2020 USA Presidential election with Donald Trump yet to concede to the newly elected President and the turmoil and polarisation this has brought about). How such principles can be translated into classroom practice and inform curriculum development can be the subject of further research. Any such applications will have training implications for teachers (e.g. Hansen et al., 2015), and they will be important issues to be considered, including how marginal and oppressive voices could be handled in the classroom.

For example, one might think of Black Lives Matter (Okolosie, 2020) and the potential risks involved in encouraging discussions that might legitimise racist views in the classroom. Yet Mouffe's (2005) response to this issue is that it is the *lack* of adversarial relations that can enable the growth of entrenched identities, thus reinforcing phenomena of bigotry or oppressive voices. Mouffe's (2005) approach could be accused as being overly optimistic as it places a lot of faith on the process of transforming enemies into adversaries, and for some is a weak response (Leiviskä, 2018). It might also be that associative approaches to agonism – e.g. Connolly's (1991) ideas about challenging essentialist identities – are more appropriate to address such issues compared to Mouffe's agonism. However, the point is that agonism does not embrace any form of oppression and in the case of Black Lives Matter, it could be envisaged as a way of avoiding the forming of

essentialist identities within the classroom, contributing to the development of a “listening culture” (Okolosie, 2020).

Second, we also feel that agonistic principles could be used as a tool to help teachers, school leaders and policy makers to manage educational issues and tensions in a productive way. This is something currently lacking in the literature. Education is intertwined with difficult tensions that are associated with a multiplicity of stakeholders with various interests (students, parents, school leaders, government policy makers, wider society) (e.g. Kenway, 2002; Noyes, 2005; Weale & Adams, 2019). Core issues that have long dominated and are currently emerging more strongly in relation to the teaching profession include: educational and welfare reforms; austerity; a growing focus on high-attainment, league tables and accountability; a lack of resources; increased teacher workload; and wellbeing issues amongst staff and students (for example, see Apple, 2013; Ball, 2019; Hall et al., 2015).

We can begin to briefly work these ideas through by drawing on a specific example of such a tension that emerged recently in education in the UK. In 2019, there was an attempt to introduce LGBT equality lessons as part of a broader equality programme in schools in England that generated a negative response from some parents of children from Muslim communities and was widely reported in the mass media (Parveen, 2019). This posed a considerable challenge for some local school leaders, with a clear and simple resolution not foreseeable. School leaders could not fall back on the Department for Education or the local authority for guidance and support (a side effect of the increased independence of schools), and there were legitimate arguments from different perspectives that could not be reconciled: namely respect for diversity (the school’s side); and conflict with religious beliefs and family values (the parents’ side). It has been argued that entrenched identities deriving from, for example, one’s ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexuality, disability have also the potential to reinforce a sense of difference among people – what has often been discussed as *identity politics* (Doward & Boahen, 2019).

Research could thus explore how agonistic principles could be used to provide directions and/or practical tools in similar cases where a rational consensus, as advocated by Rawls (2005), might be less possible. Such approaches could be informed by dissociative (turning enemies into adversaries) or associative (a focus on what people share) agonism – including also developing procedures on how this might practically be done. There could be efforts to infuse elements of rational deliberation (Englund, 2016); or attempts for a temporary closure that involves summarising and making visible the different positions (Tryggvason, 2019); or perhaps even an acknowledgement that an agonistic approach is not appropriate in this case, as it can further polarise the situation (Deveaux, 1999).

In summary, this paper reports findings from a scoping review exploring how the concept of agonism has been used in the educational literature. We found that there have been a range of attempts to apply agonistic principles in education, and different interpretations of such principles, which reflect broader debates about the philosophical underpinnings of agonism. Building on the findings, we argue that there is still a lot to be done in terms of translating agonistic principles (dissociative or associative) into meaningful practical applications for education – for example, in terms of curriculum development, guiding debate in the classroom, or as tools for navigating stakeholders’ perspectives. We thus await with anticipation what future research has to say about agonism in education.



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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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